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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between suspensions and expulsions of African American students, teacher effectiveness, and school safety in New Orleans (Louisiana) public schools. Preliminary evaluations for the 1995-96 school year are presented. The initial phase of data collection focused on focus group interviews with groups of 10 school personnel, 10 parents, and 20 students at each of 10 public middle and high schools with the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions. A total of 310 people participated in these focus groups (163 students, 58 parents, 89 teachers). Questionnaires were prepared for each of the participant groups. Principals at the target schools stated that they have experienced problems with a small cadre of teachers who account for a large percentage of "inappropriate" disciplinary referrals that could otherwise be handled in the classroom. It is also found that the prevalence of violence in the surrounding community continues to have a significant effect on the overall safety of schools. These violent behaviors negatively affect students' ability to resolve conflicts nonviolently, as evidenced by an increase in fighting among females at the middle school level and the problems of large schools that are difficult to secure and vulnerable to intrusion by outsiders. (Contains 1 table and 10 references.) (SLD)

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Health and Safety Initiative in the New Orleans Public Schools

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The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between suspensions and expulsions of African American students, teacher effectiveness and school safety in New Orleans Public Schools. Preliminary evaluation of school safety and teachers' classroom management skills with the number of referrals for suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary actions among African American students during the 1995-96 academic year will be presented.

The initial phase of data collection focused on conducting focus group interviews with groups of ten school personnel, ten parents and twenty students at each of ten public middle and high schools with the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions. A total of three-hundred-ten (310) individuals participated in these focus group interviews (N = 163 students; N = 58 parents; N = 89 teachers).

Information was collected from focus group participants via three questionnaires for each of the three participant groups.

The results show that principals at the target schools have stated that they have experienced problems with a small cadre of teachers who account for a larger percentage of "inappropriate" disciplinary referrals that could otherwise be handled within the classroom. Additionally, we found that the prevalence of violence in the surrounding community continues to have a significant effect on the overall safety of these schools These violent behaviors negatively affect students' ability to resolve conflicts nonviolently; an increase in female fighting at the middle school level and large schools which are difficult to secure and vulnerable to intrusion by outsiders.

Discipline in America's schools has been characterized as a major educational concern of the general public for the last three decades. Accordingly, many school governing bodies are devoting serious attention to issues related to classroom discipline, and many are attempting to find alternatives and reasonable remedies to suspending and expelling students.

Teachers are also concerned about the issue of school discipline, as noted in the Metropolitan Life Insurance yearly teacher survey. Educators recognize that their primary attention should be devoted to improving academic performance in general and standardized test scores in particular. But they find themselves spending more time addressing the varying degrees of student behavioral problems which manifest themselves in the classroom. As a result, some teachers use suspension as an expedient tool for removing their students whom they consider to be "disruptive." A suspension serves a dual purpose for both the teacher and the students. First, it offers a mechanism for the teacher to temporarily dismiss a misbehaving student from the classroom or school building. Secondly, it allows students an opportunity to "cool down" and reflect on the disruption that they have caused (Garibaldi, 1979). These are not always remembered though because many students are suspended for non-violent offenses that could have easily been resolved by the teacher at the school site (Children's Defense Fund, 1975).

Education practitioners from kindergarten through college are embracing alternative solutions to the phenomenon of school discipline. For example, pre-service teachers at Upper Iowa University are now being introduced to conflict resolution practices (Nicklin, 1996). Several national organizations, including Educators for Social Responsibility, Children's Creative Response to Conflict, the National Association of Mediation in Education, and the New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution, offer workshops which focus on implementing and coordinating school-based conflict resolution programs. Despite skepticism regarding the

benefits of some conflict resolution programs (Posner, 1994), many instructors view them as practical answers to some discipline problems faced within classrooms.

In 1995, researchers at the Xavier University began exploring the relationship between teacher effectiveness, specifically classroom management skills, and the number of referrals for suspension and expulsion among public middle and high school African-American students. Our major goals were to find out if such a correlation existed between the variables and, if it did, to develop a proactive solution to this problem. Earlier studies reported in, Educating Black Male Youth: A Moral and Civic Imperative, revealed that a disproportionate number of African-American male students had been suspended from school, even in the lower grades (Garibaldi, 1988). A key recommendation of the study, therefore, was that the local school district should rely less on suspensions and expulsions and instead develop effective and alternative methods to address minor misbehavior of students. Research demonstrates clearly that students who know how to manage their conflicts constructively usually exhibit higher academic performance and are less likely to be suspended/expelled from schools (Bowditch, 1993; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley & Burnett, 1992). Accordingly, New Orleans Public Schools have adopted school-based conflict resolution practices as one strategy to respond to inappropriate student behavior.

Method

The hypothesis of this project is that teachers with good classroom management skills and the ability to conduct classroom-appropriate conflict resolution practices are less likely to make large numbers of referrals for suspensions and expulsions.

Procedure

In order to investigate the aforementioned hypothesis, an outcome evaluation of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) in New Orleans Public Schools was conducted

in four schools. The evaluation focused on the potential impact of the program on classroom management skills and referrals for disciplinary action as reported by teachers and principals trained in the program at the target schools. These schools included two elementary, one middle, and a magnet from kindergarten through 8th grade referred to as School A, School B, School C, and School D respectively.

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) is best classified as a school-based program committed to a holistic approach of creating a school "culture of peace." The major components of RCCP include: a) 24 hours of teacher training, b) 6 to 10 follow-up visits by staff developers who demonstrate lessons and assist teachers in incorporating RCCP curriculum into their ongoing teaching; c) training in the philosophy of RCCP for school administrators; and d) student training to enable students to serve as peer mediators in resolving conflicts among other students (DeJong, 1993).

The training for faculty, parents, and students is designed to provide a better understanding of conflict and its role in the personal and educational lives of individuals (Dejong, 1993). While each group is trained separately, the underlying tenets and instructional strategies remain the same. Each training module is interactive and involves experiential exercises. The Twomey Center for Peace through Justice, an office of Loyola University of New Orleans which focuses on social justice issues, coordinates RCCP in New Orleans and has offered the training each year since 1991.

Result

Impact on classroom management

As a means of determining the impact that RCCP training has had on teachers' ability to manage their classrooms, how many teachers were asked questions regarding the amount of

time they spent dealing with conflicts and the nature of these conflicts. Teachers' responses to the amount of time they spent addressing student conflicts (i.e., all day, a specific portion of the day, or portions of the week) can be classified as follows: 24% stated they spent an average of 35 - 40 minutes addressing conflicts during the school day; 35% stated that they spent the overwhelming majority of the school day addressing conflicts; and 41% stated that they usually spent an hour a day, 2 to 3 days per week, addressing conflicts.

Many teachers' responses regarding the nature of conflicts within their schools parallel the disciplinary statistics provided by the school system's Student Hearing Commission. The majority reported that students were unable to manage their anger or disagree with each other without fighting; and the Student Hearing Commission's data revealed that fighting was the number-one reason for student suspensions among the four schools targeted for this evaluation during the 1995-96 school year. Thus, statistical and qualitative data verify the necessity for preventing and resolving fights between students.

Teachers believed that external causal factors primarily contributed to the occurrence of in-school fighting. For example, the neighborhoods where many of these children live reinforce violence as a reasonable resolution to conflict. Teachers noted that this pattern of behavior was supported by parents who encourage their children "to hit anyone who hits you" and not to accept "foolishness" from anyone. Additionally, fights in surrounding neighborhoods were often related to in-school fights.

Teachers were also asked about the amount of time they devoted to implementing RCCP activities. Their responses can be summarized into three categories: Weekly, daily-unspecified, and daily-specified. Thirty-eight percent (38%) stated "weekly," 35% indicated "daily-unspecified," and 25% indicated "daily-specified." The average amount of time given for

the "weekly" category was once per week. For those teachers who said they taught RCCP conflict resolution daily, the average amount of time was 30 minutes per day.

Overall, the effect of RCCP on teachers' capacity for effective classroom management was positive based on the teachers' and principals' perceptions. Over half (57%) of the teachers were able to identify problems that they were not able to effectively handle prior to their RCCP training. These included disputes involving property, fighting, name calling, teasing, bickering and other incidents which had their origin outside of the school. The program has helped many teachers recognize minor fights, and taught them how and when to intervene before the conflicts escalate. As one representative from this group stated, "I now know how to mediate and help them [students] resolve their problems and maintain their friendships."

The remaining 43% of teachers indicated that they could not identify any incidents that they were unable to handle prior to their RCCP training. A representative from this group stated, "I have always been able to handle it [conflict]. I had no choice." Statements such as these indicated an apparent reluctance on the part of many teachers to identify problems that they previously may not have been able to handle effectively. However, within this group, many teachers did state that their RCCP training had now shifted the focus of problem solving to children with minimal teacher intervention. A respondent from this group stated: "The idea is not that I can't handle it [conflict]. The idea now is that I want the children to work out their own problems. I can stay out of it as much as possible and let them see how they can work it out themselves."

Based on the teachers' preceding responses, it appears that RCCP helped teachers to de-escalate low-level conflicts which had the potential of escalating into more serious conflicts. Typical of these were name calling or arguments over possessions (e g., "You took my pencil.").

According to these teachers, most conflicts and fights, except those that were violent, could be managed better as a result of RCCP training.

Principals' perceptions

While each of the four schools had unique conditions and experiences with RCCP, principals shared many similar perceptions regarding its effects on teaching and discipline. Overall, principals expressed satisfaction with how RCCP "empowered" teachers and their resulting ability to "empower" students to become proactive participants in problem solving situations. Below are summaries from each principal's interview.

School A

There have been fewer disciplinary referrals at this school as a result of RCCP training. Because teachers and students were able to analyze and de-escalate conflicts, problems were resolved before they reached the principal's office. Compared to other schools where this principal had worked and information gleaned from principals with whom he had conferred, teachers and peer mediators in this school were resolving problems more effectively.

School B

Overall, the presence of RCCP in this school did not have a noticeable impact on the number of disciplinary referrals. Many teachers continued to refer problems that they should have been able to manage within their classroom. Among the veteran teachers, those who were more flexible utilized RCCP skills, but those who tended to be inflexible continued to make inappropriate disciplinary referrals to the principal.

School C

This principal believed that RCCP had not been fully integrated into the daily routine of the classroom. This was primarily due to teachers viewing the infusion of a creative non-violent conflict

resolution program into the "normal" curriculum as a challenge. These teachers were less likely to spend class time teaching conflict resolution strategies because they knew that they were evaluated on their ability to teach academic content. While RCCP had not made a significant difference in the number of disciplinary referrals, it had resulted in the active involvement of students in the problem resolution process.

School D

Within this school, RCCP had been especially helpful to younger teachers who were not "grounded" in a particular style of handling situations and had not yet developed a "reputation" of being firm disciplinarians. The training helped these teachers to improve their ability to effectively manage their classrooms. Problems in their classrooms occurred less frequently; and, when they did occur, they were solved more quickly and efficiently. Despite the popularity of RCCP among younger teachers, this principal reported that some of the veteran teachers were reluctant to commit to the program. Instead of adopting a new classroom management approach, these teachers maintained their current practices for handling disruptions and expected the principal to manage their classroom difficulties.

Suspension and Expulsion

A review of these schools' suspension and expulsion data suggested that a tenuous link existed between RCCP training, teachers' classroom management practices, and suspension and expulsion referrals. One reason for the lack of congruence among these factors was the varying interpretations of behavioral incidents by teachers and school administrators. The New Orleans Public Schools Discipline Code outlines the code of conduct and corresponding disciplinary actions/consequences for violations. Behaviors, such as possession of a weapon and the possession of an illegal substance, were clearly subject to a specific disciplinary action and were not likely to be misinterpreted by

school personnel. Other misbehaviors, such as "excessive distraction of other students," were not as clearly defined. In the second example, teacher and/or administrator discretion may have been used to determine the type of disciplinary referral or consequence which the student would receive.

Summary of RCCP's Impact

The evaluation of RCCP's impact on classroom management in four New Orleans Public Schools indicated that a number of teachers felt "empowered" as a result of their participation in RCCP training. Of a total of 63 teachers 36 or 57% of them clearly expressed that RCCP training provided them with the skills to more effectively manage conflicts at the classroom level. For example, teachers were able to prevent low-level conflicts (i.e., disagreements involving the taking of one's possessions) from escalating into violent fights. However, principals felt that many veteran teachers were less likely to commit to the program and made minimal efforts to utilize the program's strategies.

Forty-three percent of teachers who participated in the study indicated that they could not identify incidents which they were able to handle as a result of their participation in RCCP training. While many of these teachers stated that they have always been able to handle conflicts, the focus of their interventions had shifted to students resolving their own problems with minimal teacher involvement. Therefore, while teachers applauded students' proactive approach to problem solving, students' active participation in resolving their problems decreased the amount of time teachers spent managing student behaviors.

Most of the teachers interviewed felt that they only referred the more serious student disciplinary problems to their principals. Conversely, the principals felt that they received an inordinate number of referrals which should have been handled by the teachers.

Assessments of the impact of RCCP on disciplinary referrals are inconclusive at this time

because the program has not been fully implemented in the participating schools. Despite findings which indicate a positive effect on teachers' classroom management skills, there is not enough evidence to suggest that RCCP decreased the number of teachers' referrals for suspension and expulsion. In addition to investigating the training process, future evaluations of RCCP's effect on classroom management skills should focus on the disciplinary referral patterns of teachers who do not use RCCP with those who actively employ its strategies.

Perceptions of school safety and suspension and expulsion referrals by use of focus groups

Ten public middle and high schools with high rates of suspensions and expulsions were selected. Due to the racial composition of the target schools, the overwhelming majority of participants were African Americans. A clearer illustration of this point is that of the 82,280 students who attended New Orleans Public Schools during the 1995-96 academic year, the gender composition was relatively equal 50.5% male-- 49.5% female, in contrast to the racial composition which was overwhelmingly African American; 90.2% African American; 5.8% White (Non-Hispanic) 2.6% Asian; and 1.4% Hispanic.

Of the four-hundred (400) individuals recruited for the sample, three-hundred and ten (310) participated in the focus group interviews (N = 163 students; N = 58 parents; N = 89 teachers). Ninety-seven percent of student participants identified themselves as African American, with 1% Caucasian, 1% Asian, and 1% Hispanic. Thirty-eight percent of student participants were male. Among the school personnel, 90 % identified themselves as African American, while the remaining 10% identified themselves as Caucasian. Twenty-nine percent of the school personnel were male, and among parent participants, all identified themselves as African American 16% of whom were male. Fifty-eight percent of the targeted parents participated in the focus group interviews.

Focus Group Data and Disciplinary Statistics

When asked about the safety of their school, 60% of school personnel and 50% of both students and parents indicated that their schools were not safe. Factors given by school personnel for lack of safety included: the large size of schools, which made them vulnerable to outside intrusion; the return of students to the school site after they were identified with weapons; the lack of visibility on the part of school administrators; and inconsistencies in teachers' and administrators' enforcement of disciplinary procedures resulting in the communication of ambiguous messages to students regarding the consequences for inappropriate behavior. Suggestions given by school personnel to improve school safety included: increased presence and visibility of school administrators and security; ability of personnel to react quickly to fights; and conflict resolution activities which enable students to resolve conflicts and prevent them from recurring.

When asked whether student behavior had changed positively or negatively during their tenure at the respective schools, 70% of students, 60% of parents (average tenure time) , and 80% of teachers (average tenure time) responded that student behavior had taken a downward turn as exemplified by their unwillingness to bring school supplies; the increase of trivial disagreements which led to student fights; and a general lack of respect that students had for themselves and others. Over a one year period four of the ten schools had an increase in suspensions from student fights, while the remaining six schools had double-digit decreases in these suspensions.

In response to the question regarding the time and place of fights, students stated that fights occurred before, during, and after school. Students at five of the ten schools emphasized that a large number of fights occurred after school. Parents, school personnel, and students all stated that the prevalence of student fighting in the surrounding communities contributed to in-school fights. As one teacher stated, "The violence is brought into the school. The school is the arena and members

of the student body are spectators. Whatever happens in the community and in the immediate neighborhood, the conflict is brought here so that they can have the approval or disapproval of their peers." As indicated in six of the ten target schools they experienced an increase in expulsions resulting from "gang fights."

In response to the question regarding strategies used to address inappropriate student behavior, teachers' replies included the following: employing conflict resolution practices in the classroom; separating those students involved in interpersonal conflicts; removing students from the classroom to provide a "cooling off" period; moving disruptive students to neighboring teachers; the modifying of a teacher's voice and/or facial expressions; referring students to the principal; and working with students involved in interpersonal conflicts to help them sharpen their communication and negotiation skills.

Despite teachers' use of the aforementioned practices, the target schools had a net increase of 210 suspensions over a one year period. Table 1 illustrates the rise in suspensions at the ten schools.

Insert table 1 about here

A key discovery made from this research focuses on the reporting format for recommendations for suspension/expulsions made by teachers in the target schools. It is difficult to determine if particular teachers and students disproportionately contribute to a school's suspension/expulsion statistics because the current reporting system does not analyze individual disciplinary referrals. It is recommended that the local school district change its suspension/expulsion reporting procedures to accurately identify teachers who make an

inordinate number of disciplinary referrals and students who are repeatedly suspended/expelled. With this information, schools could develop workshops which focus on providing solutions to the classroom management difficulties of these teachers. Schools could also provide services to address specific circumstances which cause an individual student to be repeatedly suspended.

The results from the focus group interviews clearly indicate that teachers, parents, and students believe that their schools were unsafe. Reasons given for the lack of safety are internal problems which can be addressed by adopting some of the participants' recommendations. However, those caused by external factors are not so easily addressed. Multi-faceted solutions from community groups, law enforcement agencies, and the school district, are needed to address problems such as the ward rivalries.

The perception that students' behavior has changed negatively is not surprising due to the persisting problem of violence in the city. Despite a 14 percent decrease in the 1995 murder rate, the city experienced an 11 percent increase in rapes, a 9 percent increase in armed robberies, and a 2 percent increase in simple robberies (Butterfield, 1996). Juveniles (ages 8 - 16) accounted for 28% of the city of New Orleans' murders in 1995.

Conclusion

The implementation of conflict resolution practices, the enhancement of teachers' classroom management skills, and the importance of school environmental conditions are important solutions for addressing the school discipline and safety issues of most public schools. But because this is a concern of the entire community, colleges and universities, community groups, and the public-at-large must become more involved in the nation's schools. The current process of removing "troublesome" students from the traditional educational setting is a reactive solution to a problem that deserves more thoughtful alternatives. Hopefully, the potential benefits of classroom-

appropriate conflict resolution practices will encourage school districts to adopt more proactive approaches to classroom discipline so that all students can learn in a safe, conducive learning environment.

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Table 1

Target Schools' Expulsion Statistics for Gang Fights: 1994/95 - 1995/96

School	1994-95	1995-96	Change
School 1	11	66	+55
School 2	24	36	+12
School 3	25	14	-11
School 4	49	42	-7
School 5	5	17	+12
School 6	4	12	+8
School 7	37	40	+3
School 8	6	5	-1
School 9	25	60	+35
School 10	18	24	+6